

# ARTnews

**Reviews:** New York

## David Maisel

Von Lintel

Since 1983, when he helped his mentor Emmit Gowin photograph the aftermath of the eruption of Mount Saint Helens, David Maisel has trained his camera on the strange—and frequently gorgeous—devastation wrought on the American landscape by environmental tampering. For an ongoing project he calls “Black Maps,” Maisel has captured aerial views of open-pit mines, polluted lakes, and ravaged forestlands, joining a group of photographers—among them, Edward Burtynsky and Richard Misrach—who have built careers out of ecological catastrophe.

In his latest series, shown here, titled “Oblivion” (2003–5), Maisel’s subject is Los Angeles as seen from the air. Far from Hollywood’s pool-studded, sun-drenched “Eden,” this is an ashen, post-apocalyptic view, made all the more forbidding by Maisel’s decision to print these pictures in negative. The skyscrapers appear as white Lego blocks, and the trees and parklands look like blooms of mold. From close up these gridded urban landscapes come to resemble enlarged images of computer chips. It’s a nightmarish world, cleanly intersected or bound by L.A.’s looping freeway system. Though the photographs’ surfaces are seductive,



David Maisel, *Oblivion* #1380-45n, 2004, C-print, 40" x 40".

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boasting rich grays and blacks, each 40-by-40-inch C-print, numbered and titled *Oblivion*, asks, “How can people live this way?”

Three prints from Maisel’s “Terminal Mirage” series (2003) showed a more sumptuous sensibility. These were photographs of Utah’s Great Salt Lake and Great Basin, inspired by Robert Smithson’s writings. The Great Salt Lake is considered “terminal” because it has no natural outlets, but in this context the word has a deathly connotation. The lake has been crosscut over the years to harvest minerals, and both naturally occurring algae and man-made toxins have lent the surface a rich palette. Maisel’s images transform this wreckage into geometric panes of gleaming color that reference cloisonné metalwork as well as modernist painting. It’s a scorching and ironic beauty.

—Ann Landi